

Tackling HMO Reimbursement Rates

By Deborah Barfield Berry
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Washington - With the backing of key New York lawmakers, Rep. Steve Israel (D-Huntington) yesterday touted a bipartisan measure he reintroduced that would increase federal reimbursements to managed care plans that serve seniors.

"Help is on the way," Israel told a room of seniors, including 20 from New York, who were gathered in a Senate office building. "We're not giving up until we get this done."

Hoping to lure more health care plans to Long Island, Israel introduced a bill late Tuesday that would change the funding formula for HMOs, tying reimbursement rates to local health care costs. The bill would cost \$3.5 billion over 10 years.

Sen. Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.), along with Sen. Rick Santorum (R-Pa.) introduced a similar measure in March.

Currently, HMOs that serve seniors in the federal program called Medicare+Choice are paid higher rates in New York City than in Nassau and Suffolk counties. HMOs have said they left areas like Long Island because reimbursements were low. Yesterday, Schumer, Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-N.Y.) and Rep. Tim Bishop (D-Southampton) called for Congress to act on the measures.

While Congress debates how to add drug coverage to Medicare, it has to come up with some short-term solutions, Clinton said. "We're here because we have a problem," said Clinton, noting that many HMOs have dropped Medicare. "We've seen that in New York a lot and we've certainly seen that on Long Island."

Schumer called Medicare "a great system," but said "the trouble is that it's become so expensive that it's hard for people to afford it."

Nearly a dozen Medicare HMOs have left Long Island in recent years, leaving thousands scrambling to find new plans or paying higher premiums and co-payments for fewer benefits.

Some seniors have had to return to the more costly traditional Medicare, the federal insurance program for the elderly and disabled, which doesn't offer a drug benefit. Many seniors had enrolled in the HMO plans for drug coverage and lower premiums.

Israel introduced a similar measure last year, which passed in the House but died in the Senate. This session, he teamed with Rep. Jim Greenwood (R-Pa.), a key player on health issues.

Yesterday, Israel also met with officials from the White House and the federal Department of Health and Human Services to discuss ways to attach his bill to a pending plan to add a Medicare drug benefit.

Joan Andersen of Rocky Point left yesterday's meeting less optimistic about passage of a bill that equalizes rates and reduces premiums for Long Island seniors.

"I do think something will happen," said Andersen, 64, who helped collect more than 24,000 signatures of support. "I don't think it will be what we want ... At this point, we're hoping for the best."

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